

Middleborough Antiquarian

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MIDDLEBOROUGH HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION, INC.

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VOLUME XXXIII

SPRING-SUMMER 1995

NUMBER 1



A GROWING COMMUNITY needed more room for municipal offices and a large meeting hall, resulting in the construction of the present town hall in 1872 at a cost of \$49,000. Dedicated in December 1873, the structure has housed town offices, briefly served as a high school and public library, and even rented space to several of Middleborough's fledgling banks over the years. The 41-foot granite monument honoring the town's Civil War veterans was dedicated in 1896, with former Gov. John D. Long serving as the principal speaker at the ceremonies.

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A Message from the President

We have been asked by the Middleborough Historical Commission to publish this article, *AN ILLUSTRATED HISTORY OF THE MIDDLEBOROUGH TOWN HALL*, by Michael Maddigan, and we are pleased to honor their request.

Mr. Maddigan's article brings out the important role that this building has played in the history of the Town of Middleborough. As you read it, it will give you an insight as to why there are so many people interested in a movement to preserve this historic building. The article is extremely informative and well-written, and I'm sure you will enjoy it.

Again, we are grateful to Mr. Robert Barboza for his help in preparing this issue of the Middleborough Antiquarian for publication.

Sincerely,

Robert M. Beals, President

MIDDLEBOROUGH ANTIQUARIAN

Middleboro, Mass.

VOLUME XXXIII SPRING-SUMMER 1995 NUMBER 1

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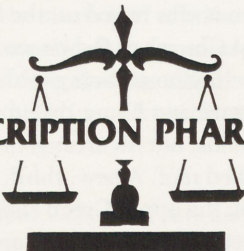
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PRESCRIPTION PHARMACY

38 CENTRE STREET
MIDDLEBORO, MA 02346
947-1909

Marcel R. Chretien, R.Ph.

Decas, Murray & Decas

Attorneys-at-law

COL. PETER H. PEIRCE HOUSE
(Next to Middleboro Public Library)

132 N. Main St.
Middleboro, MA

947-4433

George C. Decas, Esq.
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History of Middleborough Town Hall

by Michael Maddigan

Before the days of a public meeting house, the very first town meetings in Middleborough were held in various private houses throughout Town. Of these, the home most often mentioned was that of Isaac Howland who, coincidentally, once owned the land on which the present Town Hall stands.

In 1675, the Plymouth Colony General Court passed a law requiring that there be a "publicke house erected in every Towne" for use as a house of worship and place of public meeting. Towards this end, a committee was established in Middleborough, May 18, 1675, to consider the matter. Though the committee's work was interrupted by King Philip's War, it was soon afterwards resumed and what was to be the Town's first meeting house as well as first church was erected about 1679 on Plymouth Street, a mile from the present Church of the Green.

This first town house was used as early as August, 1679, for town meetings and may have been intended to be of only a temporary nature, as in November, 1690, the Town voted to construct a new meeting house to be "thirty-six by thirty, and sixteen stud." This replacement building was not erected until 1700, however, when it was raised on the lower Green in the vicinity of the present Church of the Green and Green School, the original 1679 meeting house being sold at auction in 1701.

The second 1700 meeting house originally had two ridge poles and four gable ends, but this arrangement was replaced in 1745 by a simple pitched roof. A new, third, meeting house was constructed in 1745 on the upper Green and was known simply as the Easterly Precinct Meeting House. It and the 1700 meeting house were used concurrently until about 1754/55 when the latter was disassembled and the material used to construct a dwelling on the site of the present parsonage at the Green.

With the shift in the locus of the town's population from the Green and Muttok areas to the present Town center and, in particular, to Mortontown, an area located just south of the junction of the present South Main and Grove Streets, voices were raised for a new, more conveniently located meeting house.

On September 8, 1788, an article appeared on the Town Meeting warrant calling for a separate Town House. However, largely because the issues of "by whom, where and how much" remained unresolved, the article foundered.

The issue was again mooted March 1, 1790, though unsuccessfully. Yet, the interest remained and a committee was named March 16, 1795, to consider the issue, once more. While the Town Meeting of February 1, 1796, voted not to construct the building proposed by this committee, the March 21, 1796, Town Meeting ultimately reversed this decision, voting 146 to 106 to appropriate \$1,000 for the construction of a new Town House. For this purpose, land was purchased from Levi Wood

on the northwest corner of South Main and West Grove Streets.

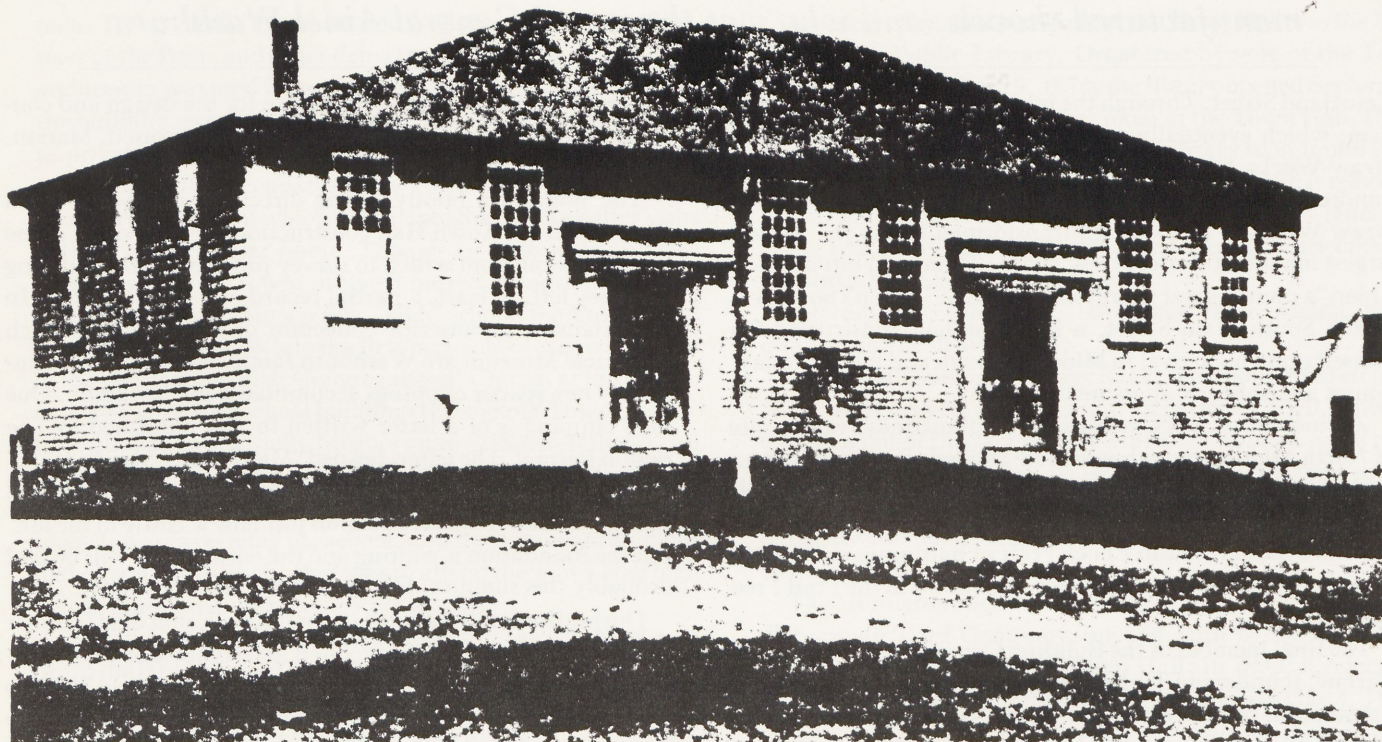
The Town House, itself, was constructed in 1796, and not 1798 as Weston maintains. In the margins of the 1796 journal of Levi Tinkham is written: "Town House Raised Aug. 23 — Began to build Chimney Sept. 1," and the building was, in fact, first used November 7, 1796, though it was not officially "completed and accepted" until January 2, 1798. Certainly, this confusion surrounding the date of construction must arise from the fact that, as Weston writes, "there were disputes in reference to various matters connected with the house which were not settled for some time" after its construction.

Essentially, the Town House served solely as a meeting hall for the transaction of Town affairs, while religious services were conducted in the few precinct churches. Strictly speaking, there were no Town offices.

With the growth in the number of tasks expected of municipal government during the nineteenth century, however, came the need for established offices for the various Town boards. To fulfill this need, the Town, for several years, used a small building on the southwest corner of Centre and South Main Streets where the Savings Bank Building now stands. This building had been moved to the lot from the Leonard & Eaton shoe factory on North Main Street by Sidney Tucker, the Town's postmaster, shortly after the original building occupying the site — the general store of Major Levi Peirce — had been destroyed by fire in October, 1866. In this building were located the offices of the Selectmen, Town Clerk, Treasurer and Collector and Assessors. Additionally, sessions of the Fourth District Court of Plymouth County were held here.

On the night of December 15, 1871, the Town safe in the Treasurer's office in the building was blown open and robbed of its contents which included an estimated \$13,650 in stocks, bonds and railroad certificates. The safe, also, probably contained other items of value as local citizens were accustomed to storing their valuables in the safe as banks with similar facilities had not yet been established in Town. Of these other valuables, however, there is no record.

Essentially, the Town House served solely as a meeting hall for the transaction of town affairs . . . strictly speaking, there were no Town offices.



MIDDLEBOROUGH TOWN HOUSE, mid-nineteenth century. Often called Middleborough's first Town House because it was the first structure erected by the Town to be devoted exclusively to municipal affairs, this simple building had actually been preceded by three earlier buildings used for both religious and civic purposes, all located at the Green. Virtually devoid of any architectural detail, the Town House was described by a later observer as resembling a Quaker meeting house. Despite its austerity, it was a handsome building. Grove Street is in the foreground of the picture.

The thieves stole a horse and carriage and fled to Taunton where they boarded the early morning train to New York City and anonymity. While some of the bonds and railroad certificates were eventually traced through the diligence of Sidney Tucker (who also served as Town Treasurer) and several stockbrokers, it is not clear whether these were ever successfully recovered.

Ironically, on February 6, 1964, a remarkably similar incident occurred when \$10,000 was stolen from the Treasurer's safe in the present Town Hall.

As for the 1796 Town House, it continued to be utilized for town meetings, as well as other purposes, including a kindergarten in later years. Following completion of the present Town Hall in 1873, the Town House was sold and dismantled, the lumber being used to construct a dwelling on the west side of North Street near Oak Street.

Impetus for construction of the present Town Hall was provided probably by a desire to consolidate the Town offices and meeting space under one roof in the center of Town, by the cramped quarters of the existing Town offices at the Centre Street location, and just possibly by the robbery of the Treasurer's safe in 1871. As a result, in early 1872, a four-member New Town House Building Committee of Horatio

Barrows, Albert Alden, Zebulon Pratt and Ivory H. Harlow was appointed.

Horatio Barrows was a partner in the firm of Leonard & Barrows which, at the time, was located on the east side of North Main Street near the Four Corners. Born in Carver and educated at the Peirce Academy in Middleborough, Barrows worked as an apprentice and master carpenter for several years before entering the shoe manufacturing business in 1853. It is, undoubtedly, due to his practical experience in the field of carpentry that Barrows was named Chairman of the Building Committee. Under the guidance of Barrows and his brother-in-law Charles Leonard, Leonard & Barrows was a highly successful and productive enterprise, churning out three to four hundred pairs of boots and shoes on a daily basis when operated at full capacity. Barrows and his small family made their home at 46 South Main Street in a large Georgian Revival house. Since then, the house has been extensively remodelled and is, today, the home of the local Masonic Lodge.

Like Barrows, Albert Alden was a wealthy local industrialist. In 1858, he had come from Foxborough and purchased from Andrew Pickens the firm of Pickens Brothers, manufacturers of straw hats and bonnets located on the south side of

Please continue on next page

Land for the proposed Town Hall was donated by Philander Washburn, who had operated stores at Muttock and the Four Corners and had manufactured shovels, and who was the son of General Abiel Washburn.

Courtland Street. Through the business acumen of Alden, the firm, which eventually operated under the name Bay State Straw Works, expanded rapidly and employed close to five hundred operatives at its peak. Its 1876 merger with the Union Straw Works of Foxborough transformed it into the world's largest manufacturer of straw goods. Thomas Weston called Alden "a man of great energy and sagacity." Alden's home was at 108 South Main Street, a house he had constructed for himself upon his arrival in Middleborough and which, today, houses a number of apartments.

Zebulon Pratt was a member of the illustrious Pratt family of North Middleborough where he resided. Pratt was instrumental in the establishment of Titicut Academy at the North Middleborough Green in 1856, and it was largely through his influence that his cousin Enoch Pratt of Baltimore in 1864 endowed the school which thereafter was known as the Pratt Free School.

The final member of the Building Committee was Ivory H. Harlow, founder of I.H. Harlow & Company which operated a steam mill on the east side of Vine Street at the foot of May Street behind the original Old Colony Railroad depot. Harlow resided in a beautiful and spacious home on the northeast corner of South Main and Prospect Streets which was razed in the mid-1950's to make way for a First National market.

Land for the proposed Town Hall was donated by Philander Washburn who had operated stores at Muttock and the Four Corners and had manufactured shovels, and who was the son of General Abiel Washburn. Though he has gone down in local history as lacking the business skills of his father, Philander Washburn was a highly civic-minded and generous individual, as well as a man of taste and means as his home on the corner of South Main and Webster Streets attests. This house was purchased in February, 1985, by the Middleborough Gas and Electric Department for use as offices.

Like the Peirce family, the Washburns owned valuable parcels of land on which the center of Town was built. In 1847, Philander Washburn donated the land on which the Central Congregational Church was built. Nickerson Avenue which today bisects property once owned by the Washburns was first known as Washburn Street.

With the conveyance of the plot of land for the Town Hall, Philander Washburn made a request, stipulated in the deed, that no other building ever occupy the lot. As a result of this wish, Federal government interest in the 1930s in the empty land to the rear of the building as a potential site for the proposed post office was diverted to other sites, including the one ultimately selected on Centre Street which resulted in the lamentable destruction of the Peirce Academy Building.

Architect Solomon K. Eaton, a native of North Middleborough, though a resident of Mattapoisett, was selected to design, then build, the structure with work commencing in early 1872. Eaton, a man of varied interests and talents, had

earlier in his career, been responsible for the design and construction of Congregational churches in Mattapoisett, Marion, Rochester and Wareham.

The Washburn family, living directly across South Main Street from the Town Hall construction site, possessed a fine vantage point from which to survey progress on the building and they left, at least, a partial record of its construction. In the extensive manuscript collection of the Middleborough Historical Museum are Washburn family letters and contemporary newspaper clippings accumulated by the family. One such clipping is of a letter written to and published in *The Boston Journal*. The letter, headed "Middleboro, May 6, 1872," was written, most likely, by a Washburn family member and relates: "A new Town Hall stands just now a 'castle in the air,' but the foundation is waiting and the cornerstone will be laid probably this summer. Oh, if it were only built now . . ."

During the construction of the building, Eaton died October 9, 1872, at his home in Mattapoisett and completion of the project was overseen by Building Committee Chairman Horatio Barrows. Though Barrows successfully completed work on the building by 1873, one chronicler has attributed Barrows' failing health after this period to the strains of the Town Hall project, coupled with daily business pressures, and the raising of a new Leonard & Barrows factory on Centre Street in 1874.

The Town Hall was dedicated in December, 1873, and, unfortunately, no programs of the ceremony are known to exist. However, a procession to the building with remarks by members of the Building Committee and other dignitaries was planned. Total cost of the building was \$48,984.36. Originally, \$30,000 had been appropriated for the project, but an additional sum of \$9,000 was required, as was a second \$9,000 for the construction of brick vaults in the basement and on the first floor.

The Construction of such a grand Town Hall elicited much excitement in the years immediately following 1873. In a program, now in the collection of the Middleborough Historical Museum, of "Olden Tyme Musicke" dating from April 14, 1875, are the following effusive words:

We've a town hall and churches, and a cemetery, and a town hall, and schoolhouses (we're going to have another) and, well, a town hall, and an academy and a town hall. I don't know but what I mentioned the town hall. It is quite a frequent topic of conversation. There are some people who find fault with it, but on the whole we are very proud of it. At any rate, the tax payers don't seem to say much agin it, so I guess it's all right . . .

In regard to the old Town House which the new Town Hall replaced, the program commented:

We had another relict in the shape of an old town hall. Strangers used to ask if it warn't a Quaker meetin'-house. It was more aboriginal in shape than the new one. But I don't think anyone misses this relict much.

From the very first, the new Town Hall was used for a variety of purposes. Of course, it housed the offices of the Selectmen, Town Clerk, Treasurer and Collector, Assessors, Overseers of the Poor, and other departments, and the second-floor auditorium was used for town meetings. Additionally, though, the building served as home to a number of municipal, as well as private, institutions.

One of the first occupants of the Town Hall was the Middleborough High School which moved into the building after years without a permanent home. Though an 1836 state law had mandated that all towns of five hundred or more families or householders maintain a public "high" school, the Town failed to do so until 1849. While the first high school was conducted in the vestry of the First Congregational Church at the Green, and later at various school buildings throughout Town, it grew to be unpopular, partially because some citizens felt that it had been foisted upon the Town to the detriment of the public grammar schools. By the 1870s, however, movement had been made towards reviving the school, and the number of students had grown. In 1876, the first class to attend the Town Hall high school graduated with eight students.

The high school occupied four rooms in the southeast corner of the building, and remained there until 1886 when a combined grammar and high school was erected on the adjacent lot to the south of the Town Hall. This school building, later

known as the Bates Junior High School, was destroyed by fire in 1954.

A second municipal occupant of the Town Hall was the Middleborough Public Library. Organized by vote of the Town Meeting of September 19, 1874, the library opened September 7, 1875, in the northeast corner room of the Town Hall. However, with some 2,000 volumes, the Library soon found itself cramped and was able to expand only in 1886 when it relocated to the rooms vacated by the high school. The Library remained at the Town Hall until 1904 when the present Library building on North Main Street was opened.

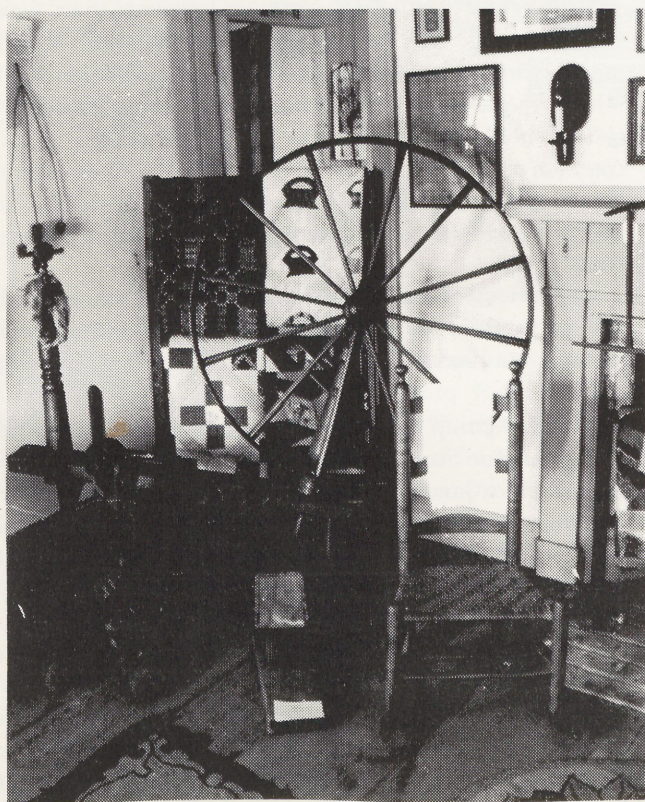
Interestingly, three local banks had their original headquarters in the Town Hall.

The Middleborough Savings Bank, incorporated March 15, 1873, with eleven accounts and deposits of \$370, initially operated out of the Town Clerk's office. The bank was a rent-paying tenant, rent in 1886 being \$50. In 1895, the bank moved to its recently constructed office block on the southwest corner of Centre and South Main Streets, now the home of Plymouth Savings Bank.

The Middleborough National Bank, progenitor of the Middleborough Trust Company, opened April 15, 1889, and for seven years operated at the Town Hall. In 1896, it relocated to the Savings Bank Building where it reopened May 4, 1896.

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After having held its first meeting at the Town Hall April 12, 1889, the Middleborough Co-operative Bank opened for business May 21, 1889, in the office of the Water Department, a convenient arrangement for Joseph E. Beals who served as Superintendent of the Water Department, as well as Secretary and Treasurer of the Co-operative Bank. The bank and Water Department shared a common office space until 1914 when the bank leased the Central Congregational Society's chapel which was located on South Main Street adjacent to the church.

Another early tenant of the Town Hall was the Plymouth County Fourth District Court. The court occupied one room in the building for which, in 1886, the county paid a rent of \$150. When the Public Library left the premises in 1904, the court was able to move into the Library's former rooms where it remained until 1914 when it moved to the Peirce Academy building on Centre Street.

One unusual feature of the Town Hall was the thick-walled brick cells constructed in the basement for use as a lock-up initially intended primarily for "tramps and transients." The lock-up must have been a dismal place for when it moved out of the Town Hall to the Peirce Academy building in 1914, *The Middleborough Gazette* wrote, "No more will representatives of the state board of health feel obliged to notify the local authorities that the sanitary conditions are poor and the place is again condemned." Once lock-up moved, the old cells were utilized as an adjunct to the brick vaults for the storage of records and books.

A perhaps unflattering tale generally told in connection with this aspect of the Town Hall's history concerns the riots of July 4, 1903, when according to *The Boston Globe*, "Mobs Rage(d) at Middleboro — Unruly Crowds Kept the Town in Terror for Hours."

At the turn of the century, Independence Day celebrations tended to be raucous affairs, and the early morning hours of July 4, 1903, were no exception. Fireworks were readily available, bonfires dotted the center of Town (many fuelled by lumber confiscated from the construction site of the Public Library on North Main Street), and a number of barns were set alight. One inebriated celebrant was placed under arrest by the "constables," but in the attempt to take him to the Town Hall lock-up, a member of the crowd fired a revolver at Sheriff Everett T. Lincoln. A doctor was fetched to attend Lincoln who, though not seriously injured, did sustain black powder burns on his face which he bore the remainder of his life.

Other police officers succeeded in incarcerating their prisoner in the Town Hall lock-up, but their refusal to release him prompted a mob estimated at five hundred to unleash a fusillade of rocks and wood at the building, smashing windows and electric globes and marring the heavy wooden doors.

Having vented some of its anger on the Town Hall, the crowd made its way to the home of Judge Nathan Washburn, Presiding Justice of the Fourth District Court, at 76 South Main Street. The crowd harangued the Judge beneath his bedroom window, but to no avail. Not only did Washburn refuse to release the prisoner, but after a police officer patrolling South Main Street was forced to seek refuge in Washburn's house from the mob fulminating outside, the Judge telephoned High Sheriff H.S. Porter in Plymouth requesting assistance. In return, the crowd pelted the Washburn house with any item readily at hand.

Though twenty-five men arrived on the eight o'clock train in response to Judge Washburn's request, and marched two abreast from the depot, down Centre Street, to the Town Hall, the crowd had dispersed by dawn, and the reinforcements were able to return home on the next train. Ultimately, fifteen people were arrested, charged and tried, and sentences ranging from two to four months imprisonment handed down.

Almost from the beginning, the Town Hall was crowded with offices, not a terribly surprising fact given the number of tenants. Overcrowding remained an unmitigated problem following the turn-of-the-century and, in 1914, *The Middleborough Gazette* wrote of "the congestion in the town house." Despite the removal of the Middleborough Co-operative Bank, Fourth District Court and lock-up from the building that same year, there continued to be "no room available for small public meetings, and the hall (was) in the same condition as hitherto without a room that (could) be used for checking purposes for balls and dances" as the Overseers of the Poor had been moved upstairs to the second floor into one of the auditorium ante-rooms used previously as a cloak room.

Increasingly, the once superfluous basement space was put to use, initially for storage purposes and, ultimately, for offices and meeting space. It was noted by *The Gazette* in 1971 that "the former charter study committee . . . was forced several times to hold its meetings in the Town Hall lobby" — a not uncommon practice still today. At the time of the above comment, the unused portion of the basement (previously used as, of all things, a pistol range) was remodelled to include a conference room.

As previously noted, the second floor auditorium was utilized for town meetings. But, additionally, it was used for other Town events and a large range of social, cultural and religious activities.

The first group to use the auditorium as a concert hall was The Hampton Students on May 1, 1874. Returning from the concert, Mrs. James Harlow noted in her diary (now in the collection of the Middleborough Historical Museum): "Friday May 1 — All went to Town Hall to hear the Hampton Stu-

A perhaps unflattering tale generally told in connection with this aspect of the Town Hall's history concerns the riots of July 4, 1903, when, according to The Boston Globe, "Mobs Raged at Middleboro — Unruly Crowds Kept the Town in Terror for Hours." Ultimately, fifteen people were arrested, charged and tried, and sentences ranging from two to four months handed down.



dents — it is truly wonderful what God hath wrought for them.”

Numerous concerts over the years were given in the auditorium, including “Two Old Folks’ Concerts and Supper in Town Hall For Benefit of Middleboro Band - Bro. Chananiah, Conductor,” on October 29 and 31, 1890. Between 1894 and 1924, as part of “The Citizen’s Course,” concerts often including members of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and Boston Opera Company were given. Choral groups were a popular fixture following the turn-of-the-century. On January 8, 1908, the Thatcher Singing Club, organized the previous year, made its first concert appearance with seventy-five participants. The Middleboro Male Singing Society was a popular performing group between 1922 and 1927. In 1924, Middleborough joined the Community Concert Association and many concerts were given in the Town Hall under its aegis.

Musical program were also wildly popular in the first half of this century. In 1905, a group of Middleborough citizens performed the cantatas “Prince of Egypt” and “Belshazzar,” and

many traveling shows made their appearance on the auditorium stage, including minstrel shows in the 1920s and 1930s.

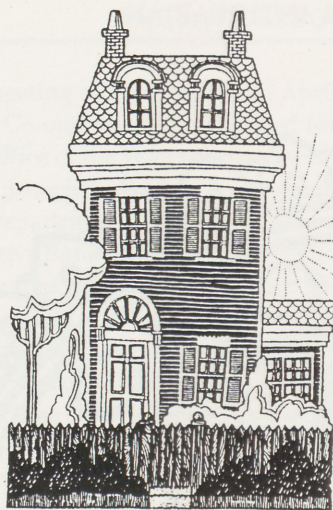
In 1925, the graduating class of the junior high school established a longstanding tradition by performing the operetta “Princess Chrysanthemum” under the direction of Mrs. Anne McFarlin, music instructor. Operettas continued to be given on the Town Hall stage by each junior high school graduating class under the guidance of Henry B. Burkland until the 1950s when the tradition was allowed to lapse.

Similarly, starting in 1907, the senior class of Middleborough High School began performing an annual play at the Town Hall, and soon afterwards, the Middleborough Teachers’ Association did likewise. The auditorium was also used for staging plays by the Little Theatre Group of Middleboro, established in 1948, and later known as The Cranberry Players.

In 1912, movies were shown for the first time in the Town Hall. The auditorium balcony was remodelled to accommodate

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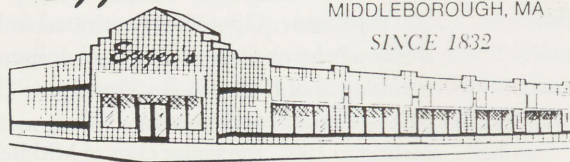


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1881 MAP OF MIDDLEBOROUGH \$10.00

a projector and films were shown three times a week. However, construction of the Park Theater directly across Nickerson Avenue in 1915 brought the Town Hall's days as a movie house to an abrupt end.

The auditorium was a popular venue for dances, including school dances and high school proms. Many dances, including the annual Firemen's Ball previously held in the hall over the School Street firehouse, came to be held at the Town Hall.

As well as being used for grammar and high school commencements, the auditorium was also used for many other purposes among which were religious revival meetings in the early 1900s, political rallies (including one for George Wallace), and YMCA basketball games. In 1963 when the second Central Baptist Church was demolished and the present church was under construction, the auditorium was employed for services.

Though the Town Hall auditorium was in constant use for several decades, the poor acoustics in the thirty foot high hall were a source of trouble and concern as early 1875 when they were first investigated. Originally, a \$3 spool of wire was purchased and strung across the hall, but to no avail. Ultimately, the walls were altered from a smooth to a rough, almost stuccoed, texture in an attempt to reduce the echo and stop vibration. Nevertheless, poor acoustics continued to plague the auditorium, prompting such organizations as The Cranberry Players to abandon the auditorium once better facilities such as the Henry B. Burkland School Musicorium and present High School auditorium became available.

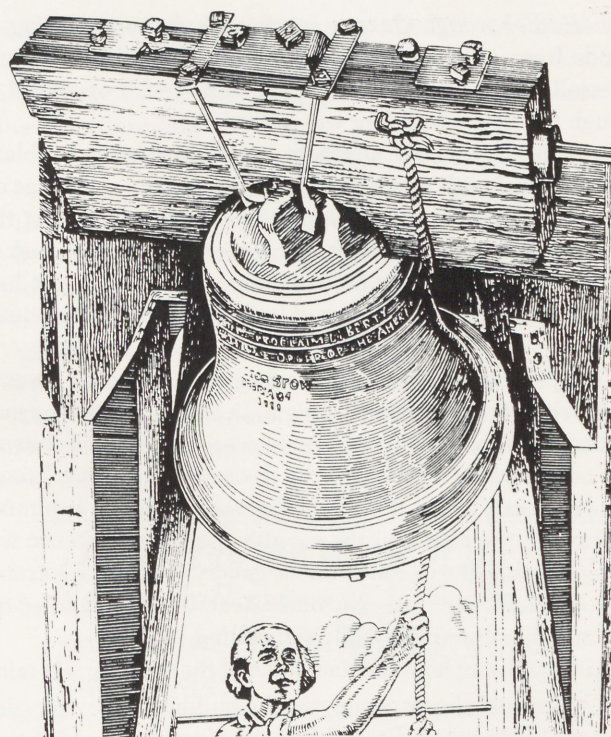
Perhaps the most recognizable feature of the Town Hall is its unique tower and dome which has been a landmark on the Middleborough skyline for nearly 125 years. However, had some citizens had their way, the tower as we know it today would have looked distinctly different.

Following the destruction of the first Central Baptist Church in 1888 and with it the Town Clock which, for many years, had been located in the church steeple, *The Middleborough Gazette* began agitating for the emplacement of a new clock in the Town Hall tower:

A town clock is one of the essential features of a well-regulated town, therefore we suggest that some initiatory steps be taken immediately to further a movement in behalf of procuring a timepiece to be placed in the tower of the town house, with a good bell of a tone entirely distinct from other bells in town . . . That town house tower was fitted for a clock, and it is the proper place for it, and now the public mind is interested in a town clock, as they more fully recognize its value by its loss, therefore now is the time to act.

Fortunately, the proposal came to nought as the church which was eventually erected to replace the original Baptist Church also included a steeple with a clock.

The tower, nonetheless, did get "a good bell of a tone entirely distinct from other bells in town" when it was selected in 1893 to house an immense bell used as part of the Town's fire alarm system. Weighing 4,490 pounds, it was the heaviest bell in Town; it measured eighteen feet in circumference and stood five feet high. Engraved on the side of the bell were the names



"A GOOD BELL of a tone entirely distinct from other bells in town" was installed in the town hall tower in 1893 to serve as part of the town's fire alarm system. The 5 foot high bell was removed in 1917, replaced by a whistle.

of the officers of the Fire District as well as that of their Chief Engineer, Eugene P. LeBaron, who died of typhoid fever during a local epidemic the year the bell was installed. In 1917, a whistle replaced the bell, which was removed and sold to help defray the expense of the new system.

Sadly, the familiar Town Hall tower today is threatened with collapse. One reason for this unfortunate state is a defect in the design of the tower, itself. Though certainly a skilled architect, Solomon K. Eaton, as far as can be ascertained, had limited experience in the design of towers other than square church steeples, and the failure to provide adequate bracing of the vertical timbers has allowed the octagonal tower to twist under the weight of its domed roof and cupola. Secondly, broken roof slates and windows, as well as other factors, have exposed portions of the tower interior to the elements and, consequently, wood rot has developed. So, while stop-gap measures have been taken to shore the tower from immediate collapse, without further structural work, continued existence of the Town Hall tower is doubtful.

Undoubtedly, the greatest calamity to have yet befallen the Town Hall was the fire of Sunday, January 2, 1916, which originated in the basement beneath the corridor which runs the length of the ground floor from north to south. The fire was discovered by janitor B.F. Jonnson who, upon reporting to work at 6:45 AM, immediately noticed smoke coming from the cellar. Upon attempting to open the alarm box (number 81), Johnson broke his key and was forced to pry the box open with a stove shaker. Papers in the Town Clerk's office were placed hastily in the brick vaults and, by the time firefighters arrived,

Please continue on next page

The Middleborough Gazette wrote, "smoke was pouring in clouds from all over the westerly side of the building and especially from the windows of the hall, and it appeared as though the entire building was ablaze."

Once on the scene, firefighters were able to bring the blaze under control with the help of the new concrete standpipe on Barden Hill which had been placed in commission just the previous day — an exceedingly fortunate coincidence as lack of water pressure from the old standpipe on Forest Street had resulted in the loss of a number of buildings in the Town center to fire.

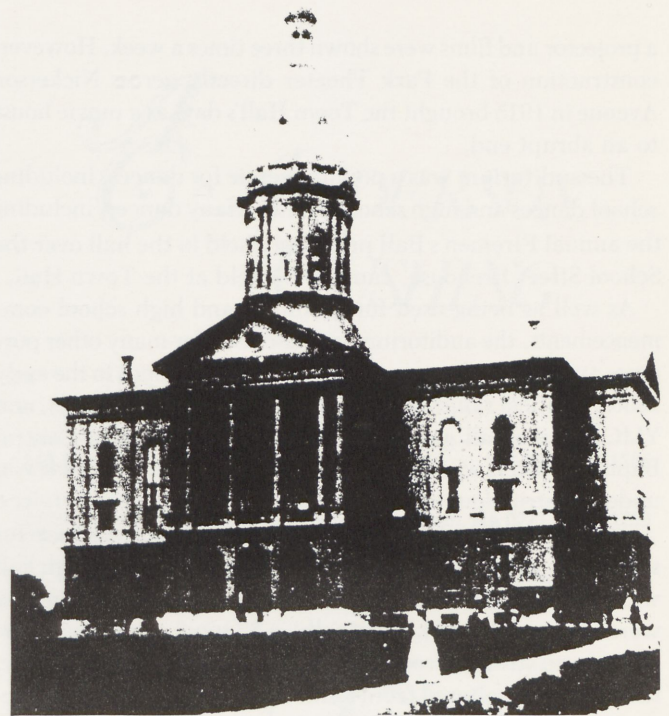
"The principal damage," according to *The Gazette*, "was in the corridor and the assessors' room, in addition to the burned timbers of the basement. The latter were burned and charred to a considerable extent and the floor of the assessors' room dropped nearly a foot. The main stairways served as a chimney in drawing the heat and the varnish the entire distance was blistered, while the windows on the gallery floor in the entrance were cracked by the intensity of the heat. The smoke filled the hall and discolored the walls and ceiling."

Damage throughout the remainder of the building was minimal, but school classes occupying the building were cancelled the week following the fire as "the noise of repairs would disturb the students." Total damage of the Town Hall was close to \$5,000, only a portion of which was covered by insurance. The disaster did however, prompt the Town to place an additional \$10,000 of coverage on the building which had been underinsured by \$27,500. Ironically, the question of insuring the Town Hall had been the topic of several heated debates in the final years of the nineteenth century.

The grounds of Middleborough Town Hall provide an appropriately pastoral setting for Eaton's masterpiece. While the building stands on what was originally a bare, scrubby lawn, improvements made continually since 1873, including the planting of trees and oramental shrubbery and the addition of a number of poignant monuments, have transformed the grounds into a lovely setting.

The first phase in the evolution of the Town Hall grounds involved the planting of two parallel rows of elm trees on either side of the original lawn, as well as a third row across the top of the lawn directly in front of the building. In later years, these trees obscured the building's facade, though many have not survived. The lawn, itself, was temporarily plowed under during the course of World War I in order that school children attending classes in the Town Hall could plant beans as their contribution to the war effort.

The first monument erected on the Town Hall grounds was the striking Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument, dedicated May 30, 1896, "to the defenders of our country, 1861-1865." Standing nearly forty-one feet high, the monument of a Union soldier standing atop a modified Corinthian column was constructed of Quincy granite at a cost of nearly \$5,000, by the E.W. Pierce Post 8 of the Grand Army of the Republic. As described by Thomas Weston, "the monument is a beautiful structure, and will stand for all time to perpetuate the lives, the valor and the sacrifices of Middleboro men in the War of Rebellion."



MIDDLEBOROUGH TOWN HALL, circa 1879. This, the first known photograph of Middleborough Town Hall, is unfortunately undated. At the time, Nickerson Avenue was known as Town House Avenue and it appears as the dirt track to the right of the photograph. The Town Hall appears a dark color because it originally was painted either red or gray to resemble brick or granite, respectively. Not until 1922 was the building painted white.

Situated on the northeast corner of the original Town Hall lawn facing South Main Street is a memorial boulder dedicated to the memory of the five hundred Middleborough residents who took part in the Revolutionary War. Funded by the Nemasket Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, the boulder was unveiled May 5, 1915, by Mrs. Calvin D. Kingman. *The Middleborough Gazette* wrote at the time that the granite boulder "would be symbolical (sic) of the endurance and the spirit that actuated not only the men of Middleboro, but the whole continental army . . . (in) striving to throw off the power that dominated men and controlled our freedom."

Running adjacent to the Town Hall grounds, Nickerson Avenue is, itself, a monument to the memory of one local war hero. Born November 24, 1892, at Rochester, Massachusetts, to Allen A. and Mary L. (Snell) Nickerson, Simeon Leonard Nickerson was raised on Warren Avenue in Middleborough in the home of his grandparents, following the early deaths of his parents. Employed as a shoemaker, Nickerson enlisted June 23, 1916, in the Massachusetts National Guard and has assigned to Company D of the 5th Infantry. Enlisting with Nickerson was John F. Glass, Jr., who lived on West Street and was probably a friend of Nickerson, and for whom the local Veterans of Foreign Wars post was named and Everett Square was renamed.

Nickerson and Glass served along the Mexican border in 1916, before being called for active duty July 25, 1917, in Company D, 101st Infantry, 26th Division, of the U.S. Army. Nickerson was promoted to the rank of sergeant, August 20, 1917, and shipped overseas, September 17, 1917. Ten months later, on July 23, 1918, near Epieds, France,

Sergeant Nickerson, Corporal M.J. O'Connell and Private Thomas Ryan volunteered to cross an open field in front of their company in order to ascertain the location of enemy machine guns. While engaged in this courageous enterprise, they were shot and killed. The heroic self-sacrifice of these three men saved the lives of many of their comrades who would have been killed had the company attempted to make the advance as a whole.

For this sacrifice, Nickerson was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, and Memorial Day exercises in 1919 included the renaming of Town House Avenue as Nickerson Avenue. On the northwest corner of Nickerson Avenue and South Main Street is located a small plaque to Nickerson's memory.

The land to the south of the Town Hall was not formally part of the Town Hall grounds until 1954. At one time, this parcel was in the possession of the Washburn family and on it stood a house owned by Abiel Washburn and occupied in the first half of the nineteenth century by Thomas Corrington, whose unyielding insistence that his daughter receive the liberal education to which she was entitled by law, was largely responsible for the establishment of Middleborough High School. This house was moved a block away to the corner of Webster and Clifford Streets. Also, a wooden skating rink occupied this same plot of land until 1884 when it was sold to George Lewis Soule, a promoter of the George Woods Organ Company. When Soule could not obtain the requisite financial backing to erect a factory to house the organ company, he purchased the rink in order to use the lumber to construct a factory on Cambridge Street.

Following the removal of the rink, a large, three-story brick schoolhouse, initially known as the Main Street School, was constructed in 1886 at a cost of \$30,000. The school building stood beside the Town Hall where the parking lot currently is, and faced South Main Street.

At first, the school housed both elementary classes (on the ground floor), and high school classes and an assembly hall (on the second floor). In 1907, the elementary classes moved to the recently completed School Street School, leaving the building to the upper grades. Twenty years later, in 1927, the high school classes, themselves, relocated to the new Memorial High School (now Junior High School) on North Main Street. The junior high school classes remained in the building on South Main Street which was renamed the Bates Junior High School in 1927 in recognition of Superintendent of Schools Charles H. Bates' long service to the Town.

With the increase in student enrollment, need for additional space became pressing in the following years. Ultimately, the third floor attic was adapted for classroom use, and a one-story, wood-frame addition was built behind the school. This addition was named the Rounseville School as it had been financed

with funds bequested to the Town by Mrs. Martin Rounseville.

On the night of September 20, 1954, the empty building caught fire in what was a suspected case of arson. Mertie Romaine continues the story:

When firemen first arrived, the fire did not appear to be serious, but suddenly through the spiral of smoke, flames blazed through the roof and soon the entire building was burning. An attempt was made to save school records, but many were lost as well as mementos, costumes, picture collections and personal items gathered together through years of teaching.

Unable to be salvaged, the ruined school, along with the grounds on which it had stood, were turned over by the School Committee to the Town which had the remains of the building demolished.

*The land to the south of the
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until 1954.*

Today, the only reminders of the Bates School are the semi-circular walkway leading from the sidewalk on the west side of South Main Street to the Town Hall parking lot and which, originally, led to the schoolhouse's main entrance, and a large, white quartz boulder on the Town Hall grounds bearing the simple inscription:

SITE OF THE FORMER
MIDDLEBOROUGH HIGH SCHOOL
1886-1927

BATES SCHOOL
1927-1954

Additionally, the Rounseville School miraculously escaped the 1954 blaze and was moved to the rear of the present Memorial Junior High School where it remains to this day.

Another monument located on this portion of the Town Hall grounds and situated symmetrically within the semi-circular walkway is the handsome American Legion War Memorial, "dedicated to the men and women who served in the armed forces in all wars of this nation." The monument was erected in the early 1960s through the efforts of the local Simeon L. Nickerson post of the American Legion, and was financed through voluntary contributions.

Constructed of light gray-colored granite, the sixteen foot wide memorial consists of three panels, the central panel being ten feet high and each of the side panels six feet high. On these panels are inscribed the names of those Middleborough residents who gave their lives in World Wars I and II, the Korean War, and Vietnam. It is a simply designed, though powerful and touching memorial.

While the grounds to the rear of the Town Hall are presently covered by a parking lot, they were, at first, occupied by a more aesthetically-pleasing lawn, with trees running the length

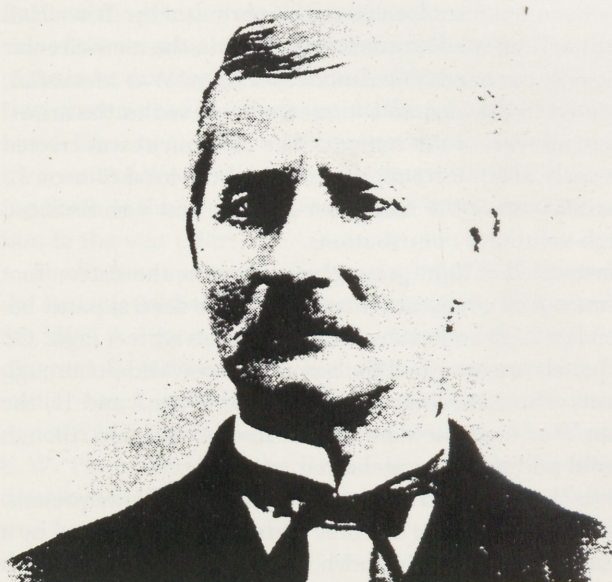
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of Nickerson Avenue. Originally, this lawn was rather undefined for, at the time of the Town Hall construction in 1872-73, Union Street did not exist. However, because there was no direct access to the building save from Nickerson Avenue and Thatcher's Row (which, technically, was not a public way, being owned by the Central Baptist Society), land was taken from Philander Washburn in 1875 and Union Street built. The Town, though, was somewhat remiss in compensating Washburn, for it was only in 1878 that he was paid \$200 for land taken for the purpose of putting through Union Street.

From 1919 to 1934, a bandstand stood on the rear lawn of the Town Hall. Financed by the Middleboro Band, which raised over \$1,000 through contributions and a three day fair, the bandstand was designed by Elliott W. Harlow and built by Wilson G. Harlow. Dedicated July 4, 1919, the bandstand was the venue for outdoor concerts on summer Saturday evenings. The decline in the popularity of concert going, however, led to the removal of the bandstand to the Thomas S. Peirce Playground where it remains, located adjacent to the softball field behind the junior high school.

The first parking spaces behind the Town Hall were created in 1926 in an attempt to alleviate the shortage of parking space along Centre, School, North and South Main Streets. At the time, *The Middleborough Gazette* wrote that the lot merely "is a temporary expediency as it will not be long before the town will be obliged to acquire a place for permanent parking." Unfortunately, despite the creation of a public lot behind Centre Street, the need for the Town Hall lot not only has continued, but has grown such that pavement now covers the entire area to the rear of the Town Hall once occupied by a spacious lawn.

Not only one of the finest wooden buildings of its size in Massachusetts, Middleborough Town Hall is an integral part of the Town's history and a storehouse of memories for Middleborough's citizens. It is, therefore, the intention of the Middleborough Historical Commission to promote awareness and appreciation of this historically and architecturally significant structure, which will celebrate its 125th anniversary in 1997, and to pursue preservation of the building for the use and enjoyment of coming generations.



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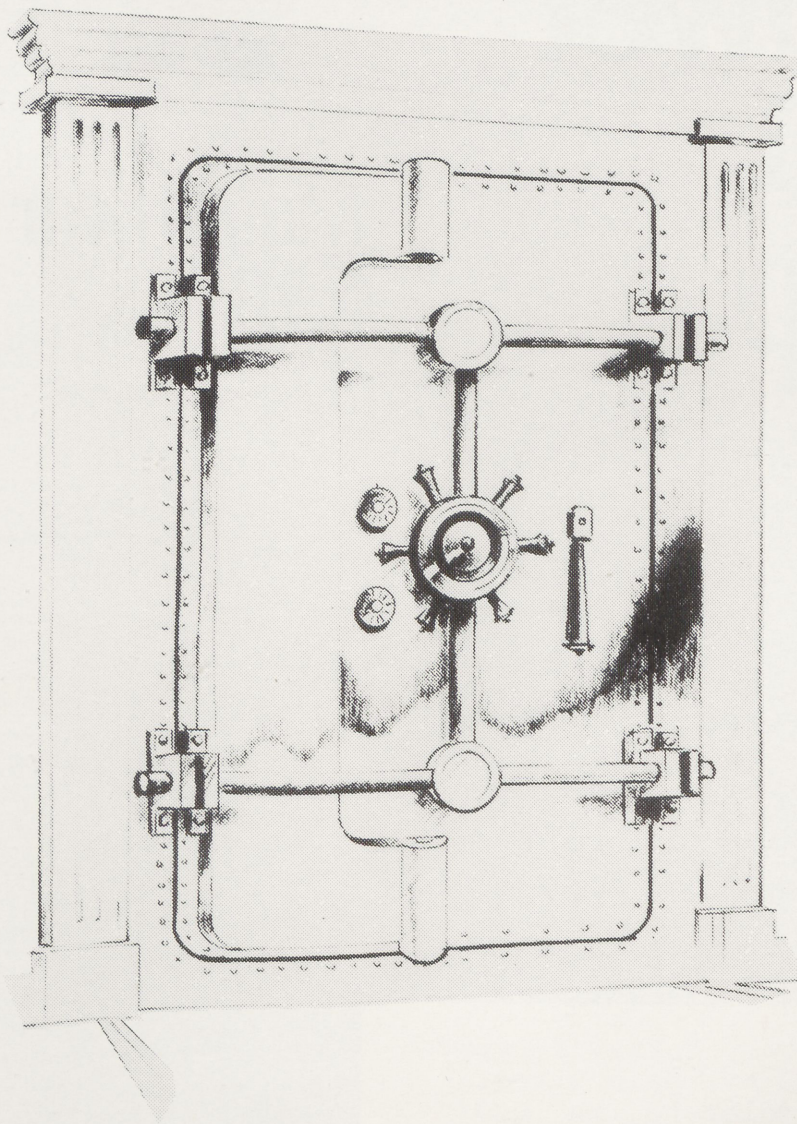
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